

TOURISM INTELLIGENCE CORNER

The Truth is Out There... Somewhere

Over the past decade, tourism has become an economic imperative for many countries and regions, and the Caribbean has not been immune to this global tourism rush. For many island destinations, tourism has evolved into a strategic economic asset, as governments and institutions seek the tourism grail of progress and prosperity, thereby producing profound structural changes in the socio-economic fabric of island communities.

While many Caribbean island destinations seek to optimize the economic benefits of tourism, regrettably, many still fail to consider, comprehend and control the non-economic impacts of tourism in terms of community impacts and risks. Theory and practice of Community Relationship Management (CRM) are often couched in a-contextual paradigms, and assume a categorical dichotomy of unambiguous impacts, thereby neglecting the political and constructivistic nature of island realities.



Figure 1. Harvesting Aloe in Aruba.

The notion of tourism as an agent of community change is not novel, as witnessed by centuries of pilgrimage. Community changes are defined as the (planned and unplanned) changes in the social structure of a community, including a society's citizens, norms and standards, as reflected in a community's social beliefs, values, behavior, attitudes, relationships and symbols. Research indicates that community structures, in the form of social networks and social capital, affect the growth and competitiveness economies.

Community Changes and Impact Assessment

Community impacts of tourism entail both short-term and long-term effects of tourism on citizens of (host) communities, and can be classified according to their *depth*, i.e., the intensity and longevity of changes in a community, and their *breadth*, i.e., the diversity and scope of changes, ranging from (quality of) life, labor, status, culture, health, welfare, safety, aspirations, beliefs, and the environment.

Consequently, *Community Impact Assessment* (CIA) includes the processes of analyzing, monitoring and managing the intended and unintended social consequences, both positive and negative, of planned interventions (e.g. policies, programs, plans, projects), and any community change processes invoked or caused by interventions.

While island societies are (erroneously) known for their size and stamina, the intrinsically complex and dynamic character of 'islandness' emphasizes the importance of "distance" in so-

mewhat paradoxical ways, i.e., as non-relevant in terms of physical space, yet simultaneously, as imperative to understanding the complex role of networks and 'guanxi' in community structures and economic development.

CIA underscores the importance of acknowledging multiple dimensions of distance in small-island tourism economies, including: *spatial* (physical proximity); *economic* (economic/labor dependence); *social* (communication and interaction); *political* (beliefs and trust in public institutions); *psychological* (self-perceptions and emotional engagement); and *cultural* (inter-cultural space).

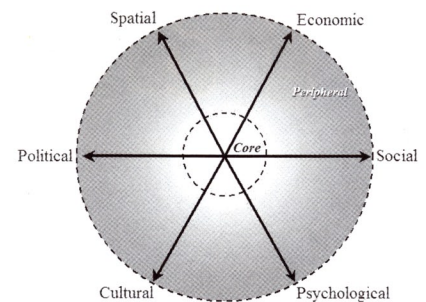


Figure 2. Dimensions of Distance.

While the latter four dimensions describe the 'softer', intangible side of distance, they represent significant drivers of perceived tourism impacts, and consequently provide strategic devices for devising 'bridging' strategies between tourism and community.

For policy makers and tourism developers, the dimensions of distance suggest that community loyalty and tourism engagement extend well beyond contracts, infrastructure, and the creation of jobs and labor conditions. Community impacts can and should be managed in a (pro) active manner by considering the social, psychological, political and cultural dimensions of impact and engagement.

However, in the spirit of the Dalai Lama, the responsibility does not only lie (solely) with those who have been appointed to do a particular job; it lies with each of us. Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world. It is, in fact, the only thing that ever has. The truth is often closer than you think...

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